



Ed Harris walks through one of Caterpillar Inc.'s Prairie for Bioenergy Demonstration Plots during a tour at the end of a workshop on warm season grasses for forage and bioenergy

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DECATUR - Tom Schwartz sees the reason for making changes to what is planted on marginal farmland.

The challenge for Schwartz is convincing farmers to plant crops such as prairie grasses instead of traditional money-makers like corn and soybeans. He said farmers need to be realistic about the numbers when creating a business plan.

"We're not going to get rich out here," said Schwartz, who works for FDC Enterprises, Inc., a provider of conservation services and green biofuels and bioproducts. "It's not like we're growing gold out here. We need to be able to squeeze a profit."

Schwartz said farmers have an opportunity to improve soil conditions with grasses that have potential use for bioenergy and forage purposes. The types of grasses that can be grown are part of the prairie for bioenergy demonstration plots across from Caterpillar Inc. facility in Decatur.

With the support of Caterpillar, the idea of opening the demonstration in 2011 was to test and show what can be done with various plants.

The Decatur-based non-profit Agricultural Watershed Institute has led efforts to establish and manage the area.

The plots sit on 60 acres with various types of warm season grasses grown, having already withstood the somewhat extreme variation in weather conditions in the past four years. The land started as a no-till soybean field, said Doug Gucker, a University of Illinois Extension educator in local food systems and small farms.

“People need to learn there is value here,” said Rick Dean, a farmer in DeWitt County.

Warm season grasses can be used as an alternative for grazing purposes, said Ed Ballard, a retired University of Illinois Extension educator. Ballard said producers can reduce their feed costs, which account for the majority of the variability in their profit.

“One of the things we have to look at is the economics,” Ballard said. “The potential is there if we just manage it. We can grow more if we manage it right.”

A key to success is not to overgraze what is grown, Ballard said.

A market for the grasses hasn’t developed as quickly as hoped when the demonstration plots were started, said Steve John, the institute’s executive director.

Part of the group’s goal is to reduce the amount of nutrients from the Lake Decatur watershed reaching the water supply, John said.

Farmers haven’t been convinced to make the changes, largely because of the economics involved. Unlike the traditional crops, measures such as insurance aren’t in place for the prairie grasses.

“We don’t have the safety net to fall back on,” said Decatur farmer David Brix, who grows hay as part of his operation and helps to manage the Caterpillar plots. “We could be wiped out as a producer.”

John and others who support the group’s goal continue working to convince farmers of what can be done.

“We’re hoping to make progress in the coming year,” John said. “We’ll start to see if we can get local folks interested in using prairie hay and develop a market.”

John said the group is interested in working with cooperators on Illinois farms to see what can be done in terms of growing and using the grasses.



Harris is shown how to identify certain types of grass by Jerry Kaiser, with the Natural Resource Conservation Service.



Rob Lawson, with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, stands in a soil pit to show the root systems of grasses at Caterpillar Inc.’s Prairie for Bioenergy Demonstration Plots.



Jack Erisman laughs while talking about intermediate wheat grass with a tour group.